WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 28 February 2023
7.30pm

Wihan Quartet
Leoš Čepický violin
Jan Schulmeister violin
Jakub Čepický viola
Michal Kaňka cello

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) — String Quartet No. 11 in F minor Op. 95 'Serioso' (1810)
I. Allegro con brio • II. Allegretto ma non troppo • III. Allegro assai vivace ma serioso – Più allegro • IV. Larghetto espressivo – Allegretto agitato

Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959) — String Quartet No. 2 (1925)
I. Moderato - Allegro vivace • II. Andante • III. Allegro

Interval

Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884) — String Quartet No. 1 in E minor 'From my life' (1876)
I. Allegro vivo appassionato • II. Allegro moderato alla polka • III. Largo sostenuto • IV. Vivace

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Beethoven's string quartets may contain some of his most profound utterances, but few of them give any clues as to the circumstances in which they were created. A notable exception is the String Quartet in F minor, one of the very few works to which he gave a qualifying subtitle – in this case, the designation 'Serioso'.

All the evidence suggests that 1810 was a particularly difficult year for the composer. For well over a decade, he had been struggling to come to terms with his increasing deafness and its dire impact on his relations with other people. In the early months of 1810, Beethoven became infatuated with his piano pupil Therese Malfatti, but when it became clear that his feelings were not reciprocated, he lapsed into despair. On 7 May, he wrote to his old friend Franz Gerhard Wegeler: 'If I had not read somewhere that no one should quit life voluntarily while he could still do something worthwhile, I would have been dead long ago and certainly by my own hand. Oh, life is so beautiful, but for me it is poisoned for ever.'

This intense personal crisis seems to have triggered a kind of creative crisis, for although the sketches for Op. 95 date from the early summer, Beethoven did not manage to complete the work until much later in the year. He dedicated the F minor quartet to another close friend and confidant, Count Nikolaus Zmeskall von Domanovecz, a Hungarian official based in Vienna. Zmeskall was also a competent amateur cellist, and at this time most of Beethoven's chamber music was first played at his house.

Beethoven later informed the English musician George Smart that Op. 95 had been composed for 'a small circle of connoisseurs and is never to be performed in public.' One of the things that makes this work so special is its extreme concision and the concentrated nature of the writing, which marked a new departure after the expansiveness of the immediately preceding quartets.

Martinů's String Quartet No. 2 is also a key work in its composer's output, in that it was one of the first pieces he produced after finally completing his formal studies: by 1925, he was nearly 35 and had undergone a protracted musical education, first at the Prague Conservatoire and later in Paris, where he moved in 1923 to study privately with Albert Roussel. Among the many things that appealed to Martinů about French music were the clarity and lightness of texture he found in the works of composers such as Roussel, and the String Quartet No. 2 shows that he had taken the example set by his teacher to heart.

However, it also reveals the extent to which he was steeped in the Czech musical tradition, for it contains many elements – such as rhythmic vitality and coiling melodies made up of brief stepwise cells – that are notable features of Czech folk music and were to become increasingly characteristic of Martinů's music the closer he returned to his roots.

The String Quartet No. 2 was written at the request of the newly formed Novák-Frank Quartet, which played it at their inaugural concert. This ensemble was led by Martinů's great friend Stanislav Novák, with whom he shared a room when they were fellow violin students in Prague and under whose leadership he played when he became a member of the Czech Philharmonic in the early 1920s. The quartet's Dutch cellist, Maurits Frank, brought Martinů's music to the attention of Paul Hindemith, another chamber music partner (the two had played together in the Amar Quartet). Hindemith then recommended Martinů's work to his own publisher, Universal Edition, and their publication of the quartet undoubtedly helped to consolidate Martinů's reputation as a composer and set him on the path to international fame.

While Beethoven's use of the epithet 'Serioso' suggests a kind of intimate confession, we should beware of attempting to ascribe a detailed programme to his Op. 95 quartet. The subtitle of Smetana's String Quartet No. 1, on the other hand, leaves us in no doubt as to the autobiographical content of this work. Indeed, the composer himself readily admitted that the quartet was a deeply personal testimony and spelled out its programme in detail.

It's tempting to speculate that the urgent questioning of Beethoven's F minor Quartet may have arisen from the composer's despair at the loss of his hearing and his failure to find happiness. In the case of Smetana's E minor quartet, however, the composer makes no bones about the fact that the entire work is overshadowed by 'the fateful ringing in my ears' that marked the onset of his deafness. An insistent high E in the first violin represents the piercing note he first heard in 1874, two years before the composition of the quartet. This note is not heard until towards the end of the finale, but the first movement, with its urgent opening viola solo, also has a foreboding quality which according to the composer acts as 'a kind of warning of my future misfortune.'

The work is by no means all doom and gloom. Smetana notes that the first movement also depicts 'my youthful leanings towards art… the inexpressible yearning for something I could neither express nor define' – a concept perfectly conveyed by the meltingly lovely second theme. The second movement, a vigorous *polka*, conjures up an image of 'the joyful days of youth.' The third movement is a tender evocation of the composer's first wife Kateřina and the happiness her love brought him. The finale begins on a joyful note and depicts the composer's artistic triumphs, which are cruelly interrupted by the intrusion of the high E that signals his impending hearing loss.